DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 340 924 CE 060 136

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TITLE Literacy in the USA: The Present Issues.
PUB DATE 5 Dec 91
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Future of Literacy and the Literacy of the Future Conference (Hamburg, Germany, December 5, 1991).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Basic Education; *Adult Literacy; *Community Control; Community Development; *Educational Improvement; Educational Policy; *Literacy Education; *Policy Formation; Political Attitudes; Political Influences; Political Issues; *Social Action

ABSTRACT

Empowering grassroots efforts in literacy is paramount in the literacy education movement. Six issues face literacy work, research, and policy in the United States today: (1) although there are many exciting and innovative literacy projects being conducted, their lessons are unexamined and they are not part of a larger organizing strategy; (2) although there are a number of leaders in the literacy field, their positions are fragile and their work is hindered by reliance on a traditional notion of leadership; (3) participatory research is barely acknowledged in the United States, although it is used in other countries; (4) the literacy experience for most learners is separate from social issues such as racism, sexism, class inequality, and poverty; (5) there is a continuing naive faith in the power of information to transform political structures; and (6) the central policy question has to shift from "how many" to "how does change happen?" The literacy field must work cooperatively with other fields that are committed to securing basic human rights and social justice. It must find ways to support the small but important changes that are happening, and it must extract knowledge through international networking. (KC)

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Literacy in the USA: The Present Issues

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Presented to the UNESCO Institute of Education Conference:
The Future of Literacy and The Literacy of the Future

Hamburg, Germany
December 5, 1991

CE 060 136

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It is a privilege to speak with you today. I'm going to talk briefly about my background and about how literacy education is organized in the United States to help you understand my perspective. Then I've been asked to address research, policy and practice in the United States; I've found it most useful to incorporate those concerns into a discussion of major issues. I hope this analysis has some relevance for those of you working in places that differ greatly from the U.S.

Introduction

At 19, in 1969, when I was an undergraduate college student, I was searching for something to be involved in that had some social meaning; I signed up to be a teaching assistant at the local, inner-city, predominantly black, vocational-technical high school in Cambridge, Mass. I worked in the print shop two periods a day with Mr. Tierney. He had 10th and 11th graders who did not know how to read and write. He wanted to use print shop to motivate them -- he thought they would be proud to see their own writing in print, in a book produced by the shop. I was frustrated with the public school setting, so after a year, I became involved in a community-based education program in Cambridge, Mass., -- an NGO.

Over time, their parents began calling me and asking for help. I knew these adults who had asked for help. I had been to their neighborhoods, their homes. I knew their children. I knew some of their pain and struggles. I knew of their poverty, their battles with the Housing Authority, the rats in their children's beds at night, their fears that they would be dislocated at any time by the powerful universities, the City Council, the inner conflicts of their own environment. So I began adult literacy work by teaching a group of women in a housing development how to write letters to government officials to complain about their housing. And how to do research on the housing laws. It was not teaching them to recite the letters of the alphabet, but by the time they finished their correspondence with the City every one of these women knew the letters of the alphabet and much, much more. They understood how those letters, when combined in certain ways, could be tools for changing the circumstances of their lives.

From this background, there never was any question as to whether literacy education is political activity; it never was an intellectual debate for me, or an abstract notion. My knowledge was generated by my concrete experience; I was privileged to be part of the process through which these women and other adults came to know and use their power.

After working for about nine years, I felt stuck; I'd lost that sense of wonder that comes when the world is transformed in the process of learning and teaching. I couldn't move beyond an individual focus to work with communities and literacy. I knew I needed new questions. I returned to graduate school.

As a literacy worker, I had had little use for the universities that surrounded me in Boston, Massachusetts. When I was invited to graduate classes to talk about community literacy work, my words were translated into an abstract language that was far from my experience. When I returned to school, I suddenly felt as if I had been stripped of my identity, displaced from my culture, and separated from my

experience; I struggled to hold on to my sense of myself as someone who knows some things. I had the good fortune to study with some social and moral philosophers, political scientists, historians, anthropologists and adult educators who tried to support my struggle to believe in my knowledge.

As I read more and more in adult literacy education, I was faced with a dilemma: the descriptions in books of the characteristics of nonreading adults appeared to be based on and promoted a negative stereotype that ignored the skill, dignity, strength, courage, dedication, and love that I had experienced among the adults with whom I had been working. In the university I found some of the language and questions I had been groping for, and some of the skills I needed to complement my intuition. I discovered a larger community of thinkers and literacy workers who shared my concerns and helped me ask better questions. But as I moved from being a graduate student to being a professor, I continued experiencing the culture of the university as disrespectful of the dignity of nonreading adults and the experience of literacy workers. I decided that my research had to provide opportunities for nonreading adults to tell their side of the story and that's what I've tried to do, through participatory research and program evaluation.

Now I am working with a group of people in an NGO called Literacy South. We work with literacy workers and learners and with community organizations. Part of our mission statement reads: "We work to support those people and organizations in the South who are committed to a shared discovery of literacy as a tool for achieving democratic communities and personal growth. Through a process of training, consultation, research, organizing, advocacy, and publication, we help learners and teachers realize their own power and the power they have to change the world around them."

Literacy education in the United States is primarily provided through federally-funded programs and volunteers; only a very small fraction of programs are grassroots organizations, based in the local community. Most teachers are part-time, with no job security or ability to do long-range planning. The rest are volunteers. The people who need to develop their literacy skills are mostly found in areas that are very poor; they are predominantly people of color and immigrants, people who have often not had access to quality schools, or have not been able to attend school because they have had to support their families from a young age. They often live in substandard housing -- in the United States there are homes in which there is no indoor plumbing or electricity. So it's important to realize that literacy work in the United States is primarily funded by the government, even though that government clearly has not been able or willing to respond to any of the other pressing needs felt by this population. There are minimal resources for grassroots alternatives to the mainstream programs.

Issues

My personal journey from practitioner to researcher to advocate and participant in a community working for enhanced citizen participation in democratic communities has been instructive. From this vantage point, I think there are six inter-related issues facing literacy work, research and policy in the United States right now:

1. There are many exciting, innovative and important new literacy projects in the US these days. The lessons learned from these projects remain mostly unexamined, however, and the development of a larger organizing strategy in which all of these projects play a part remains the greatest challenge we face.

2. There are a number of leaders in the field, but their positions are extremely fragile and their work is hindered by reliance on a traditional notion of leadership.

3. Participatory research is developing a proud tradition in many nations in the world; in the United States, however, it is still barely acknowledged.

4. The labels for literacy practice continue to change -- now we talk about family literacy, workplace literacy, and learner involvement -- and there is a slowly growing understanding of the importance of meaningful content in literacy instruction. But the experience for the majority of learners remains largely unchanged, committed to a notion of literacy as autonomous, nonpolitical and separate from social issues such as racism, sexism, class inequality, and poverty.

5. There is a continuing naïve faith in the power of information to transform political structures.

6. The central policy question has to shift from "How many" to "How does change happen?"

Discussion

I'd like to explain each of these briefly.

1. There are many exciting, innovative and important new literacy projects in the US these days. For example, at Literacy South, Jereann King is working with grassroots community development organizations such as the Wilson Community Improvement Association and with community organizers such as the Piedmont Peace Project to learn how to integrate literacy and community action. In Knoxville, Tennessee, Juliet Merrifield and Connie White at the Center for Literacy Studies at the University of Tennessee are working with a grassroots community development organization, the Lonsdale Improvement Organization, integrating literacy instruction with oral history to develop a community history designed to restore community pride and develop leadership. In Philadelphia,

Susan Lytle is conducting a teacher research project through the National Center for Adult Literacy in which literacy teachers move into a new relationship to their own knowledge and that of their students. At the University of Massachusetts in Boston, Elsa Auerbach is helping community residents who are enrolled in college develop skills that support the students' involvement in the development of their own communities, paying particular attention to the issues of linguistic minority groups. Jean Hammink, Jacque Cook, and the other board members and members of the Literacy Network, a national organization, have tried to find ways to involve local literacy teachers and students in national policy debates. Sondra Stein, in Massachusetts, developed worker-centered workplace literacy programs with state support. The Association for Community Based Education, another national organization, is trying to help community organizations figure out how to address the community economic and social issues raised by their literacy work. And Jearlean Osborne and Carol Burnett in Biloxi, Mississippi, are working with the community to transform a traditional individually-oriented tutoring program into a force for community change and development.

And the list goes on. A multitude of exciting projects has developed over the last five years. We all have learned a lot, but we don't know what we've learned, or how to build on each others' efforts. The development of a larger organizing strategy in which these projects play a part remains the greatest challenge we face.

2. There are a number of leaders emerging in the field. They include learners such as Samuel Santiago, Marty Finsterbusch and Sonya Linton who are organizing students; groups of practitioners such as the United Literacy Workers of New York City who are organizing themselves with the support of Mae Dick, a literacy advocate working for the city; and literacy workers such as Annette Laico, Beth Broadway and Phil Rose, who are trying to channel resources from mainstream organizations to support emerging student organizing efforts. We are in danger of losing this developing cadre of organizers and leaders, however, because of the difficulty of funding organizing efforts and funding grassroots literacy work, in general.

Their positions are extremely fragile and their work is hindered by reliance on a traditional notion of leadership, in which the leader is the person with vision who mobilizes others around that vision. This notion of leadership is oriented to individual charisma and organizational hierarchies of the dominant culture; it needs to be replaced by a broader commitment to collective action. For example, if a system of new reader advocates is developed in a literacy program, it usually is fit into the existing power structure. A student who has a problem in the program may appeal to his or her advocate who, in turn, will feel responsible for solving the problem by going to the appropriate authority figure -- the teacher or program administrator. The advocate is not usually taught to help the student turn to other students to explore whether their problem is shared by others in the classroom and, if so, to develop a collective strategy for responding.

This mirrors the prevailing power relationships in the classroom, but it is done in the name of student empowerment; a fundamental socialization process is labelled as a change process. Of course, it has the potential for real change when learners begin to work collectively with other students partly as a result of their

enhanced sense of their own power. Even then, however, all too often the leader feels responsible for figuring out the situation and then mobilizing the group. The alternative to the traditional notion of leadership is based in collective rather than individual conceptualization of the issue, not just collective action around a concept developed by the leader.

3. In research, as in policy and practice, the time has come to involve learners and literacy workers as partners; participatory research is developing a proud tradition in many nations in the world, but in the United States it is fledgling, barely acknowledged. The most natural focus for participatory research is on the development of participatory practice; we know very little about what works, how it works, or how it comes about. Moving teachers and administrators into roles as research partners is as important as involving students. And the research agenda should not focus solely on literacy; we have to look at successful social movements broadly as well as at struggles for social and political change in other nations.

   Critical analysis feels stalled to me. Only a very small number of researchers and theorists have been able to move beyond the rhetoric to exploring the nature of domination as it is experienced by learners in workplace literacy programs, for example, or by parents in ESL family literacy programs. And concrete examinations of the political struggles that ensue in the U.S. when literacy work is truly liberating are almost nonexistent. Furthermore, the process of moving from individual to collective action, and the role that literacy programs can play in facilitating that process, are poorly understood and minimally explored.

4. So the labels for literacy practice continue to change -- now we talk about family literacy, workplace literacy, and learner involvement -- and there is a slowly growing understanding of the importance of respecting adults' experience and culture in literacy instruction, but the experience for the majority of learners remains largely unchanged. It is primarily based on the traditional school-based model of experts who know and students who don't know, and on what Brian Street (1987) calls the autonomous model of literacy, in which literacy skills are viewed as separable from the learner and the situation. Economic rationales continue to legitimate literacy work; this can be seen in the movement toward an industrial model of literacy programs in which efficiency and cost-benefit ratios are paramount, and computers are viewed as the potential panacea.

   There is an increasing number of literacy educators in the U.S. who are interested in participatory practice; however, we need to develop mechanisms to help literacy workers move through the difficult times of changing role definitions and power relationships. As I travel around the country, literacy teachers talk to me about feeling ashamed as their work unmasks their own deeply embedded prejudices; just as we encourage teachers to help students organize, teachers must be helped to organize as well. Their isolation and marginalization undermine their emerging participatory practice. And we must understand that developing participatory practice is an organizational agenda, not just the responsibility of isolated teachers.

All too often, participatory practice has come to mean creating a "slot" for a member of the community or the student body to be involved in the pre-existing decision-making structures. True partnership, however, demands that the processes themselves must be examined and, possibly, changed to reflect new input, new experiences, new cultural backgrounds in the process. Skill assessment also has to change to reflect more respect for everyone's experiences, skills and aspirations. Susan Lytle at the University of Pennsylvania and Ron Solarzano at ETS in California are among those doing exciting work in alternative assessment. By and large, however, assessment continues to be viewed in the context of literacy as a school practice rather than as a social practice. Most literacy educators continue to believe that test scores reflect something that has a reality in settings other than schools. When adults enter literacy programs because they want to continue with their schooling, this may have some small justification. But most adults enter literacy programs because they want to use literacy skills in their lives, so it is essential to understand literacy as social practice. We still do not fully understand that when learners can fill in a job application form while sitting in class, that does not mean they can fill it in when they are standing in the hiring office, with a line of people waiting in back of them and an overworked personnel officer staring at them.

Even task-based tests must be understood within their limits -- they may simulate the task, but they do not, and cannot, simulate the situation in which the task would be accomplished. They cannot simulate the shame, the stress, the worry, the fear of many literacy situations for adults in the U.S. with low literacy skills. And they cannot simulate the collective problem solving, the group practice of literacy that is true of other situations.

Mainstream literacy work in the United States remains committed to a notion of literacy as nonpolitical and as separate from social issues such as racism, sexism, class inequality, and poverty. We continue to see the problem framed in terms of individual stigma, shame, and responsibility. In a nation in which there has been compulsory schooling for many years, lack of literacy skills is considered an individual failing, although there is some recognition that in some parts of the country access to schooling has not been equitable. Still, adult literacy education is considered a "second chance." Even the increased media attention to literacy reinforces the messages that literacy is an individual's problem and individual testimony is televised; the media has not been used in a strategic, political way to publicize actions involving and relevant to those whose voices have been silent.

Graduate education in adult literacy is proliferating, with new courses in teaching adults reading and writing skills. The best of these courses teach the whole language model, which incorporates many of our concerns about respecting adults' language, experience, dignity and dreams. They are not complemented with courses in political economy or organizing, however. And the mainstream literacy field continues to assume English language literacy as the focus of debate and development; minority language communities remain largely invisible and their issues marginalized. Debates about credentials for teachers terrify me; I don't want everyone socialized into the mainstream university's views of reading and writing education.

With a few notable exceptions, we have not been able to offer useful insights into the nature of political struggle that involves literacy development and community change. We have been stressing the importance of building coalitions, but an examination of the partners chosen by literacy organizations reveals an orientation to the dominant power structure -- government officials, corporate officers, other literacy organizations with which the territory is shared -- rather than involvement of organizations which have been engaged in political struggle, know how to organize and are committed to social justice issues rather than to literacy *per se*. All too often, coalitions have been built to insure organizational survival rather than to push change forward.

5. And I want to point to our continuing naïve faith in the power of information to transform political structures. With the problem viewed as discrete, literacy viewed as autonomous and change viewed as a matter of individual initiative, the response is framed in equally bureaucratic terms: a linear process of counting, informing, planning, and delivering services. The need to understand the nature of the problem is translated into the question: "How many illiterate adults are there?" We assume that the answer will be used by policy makers to justify allocating resources so that a "cure" will follow, in a linear fashion.

   In the United States, though, we have been counting so-called illiterate adults for at least twenty years, if we don't include the census estimates that go back to the nineteenth century. Each time the response has been that the counting mechanisms are not good enough, or that the estimates are so enormous that they go beyond that which can be addressed. Sometimes the numbers are used to justify resources for programs that serve the corporate sector. But more extensive federal action is delayed by a call for better and better counting mechanisms.

   Since there are no political initiatives at the same time to confront racism, class inequality, poverty, discrimination against linguistic minority groups, sexism and other related social issues, counting becomes an end rather than a means. When literacy is separated from its social context, statistics alone can not inform effective action. The American public persists in believing that literacy is an individual, rather than a social, concern.

6. Finally, I want to look at federal policy. Right now, federal literacy policy in the United States places capitalism at the center, and the policy research agenda is defined by counting individuals with literacy problems. I say capitalism rather than economic development, because the agenda is framed in terms of insuring profit, productivity and international competitiveness rather than by enhanced quality of life. It is an agenda of retrenchment rather than development. The central policy question that serves the government appears to be, "How many people do we have to change to maintain the status quo?"

   But the central policy question that serves the people with low literacy skills is different; it is "How can literacy development support communities in addressing their issues?" How does change happen at the community level, and what role can literacy development play. The relevant measures of success are not found on tests, but are reflected in indicators of racism, poverty, sexism,

educational equity, access to productive work, and full participation as a citizen in democratic communities.

At Literacy South, we have been working on two approaches to this question. In one approach, the literacy class acts as the central support mechanism from which students become involved in community action projects and use the literacy class as a forum for reflection, related skill development, and dissemination of information and ideas. For example, Jereann King, our Director of Programs, also teaches a literacy class in a northern,poor, rural county in North Carolina. She has been living there for many years, and knows the community and her students well. As community projects develop, such as a special project to plan new approaches to combat poverty in the county, Jere helps students in her class become involved. The entire class learns about and participates in the project through the involvement of a couple of students; the class, and Jereann, also deal with the political issues that arise as local officials resist new readers gaining some measure of power in their community.

In the second approach, we are learning how to help community organizations integrate literacy development into their work. For example, the Piedmont Peace Project organizes citizens in a mill town in North Carolina around issues of military spending, voter registration and citizen participation in local decision-making. Their work always has been politically oriented; their literacy class adds a new dimension as they specifically involve adults with low literacy skills in their organizing efforts.

In the United States, we have been working on learning how to engage in participatory research and participatory practice; we now face the challenge of creating a participatory policy development process. It will not be a linear, "efficient" process; it will be messy because participatory processes always are messy.

Where do we go from here?

There are many important and exciting developments at the local level -- the challenge is to figure out what we're learning, how to support people and organizations to have a larger impact, nationally, and to support each other in their work, locally. We have many bits and pieces scattered all over the United States that create the potential for constructive change in policy, practice and research.

The literacy field must work cooperatively with other fields -- and we in the United States must work cooperatively with those in other countries -- that are committed to insuring basic human rights and social justice. We have to move beyond abstract rhetoric to provide concrete, specific information about local practices, politics, policy and the process of change in specific situations. We have to be willing to name our struggles, to learn from each other and to allow conflict.

My perspective has been particularly influenced by my experience; my work with Jereann King, Page McCullough and Jonathan Estes, the staff of Literacy South; the board of Literacy South; my work with Jean Hammink, Jacque Cook and the other members of the board of the Literacy Network; and my work with Si Kahn,

Cathy Howell, and Tema Okun, the staff of an organization based in North Carolina called Grassroots Leadership. Grassroots Leadership is committed to working together with others to build a progressive movement for social justice in the southern United States. They have helped me learn how to think about literacy work and organizing, and they have helped all of us at Literacy South feel connected to a larger social movement in the United States.

I appreciate this opportunity to share my learning with you; I am keenly aware of how much there is for me to learn from the work in many of your countries. In the United States, the nature of the social contract is considered fixed and known; literacy is viewed as a social issue because it is seen as having an impact on the larger standard of living rather than because it is seen as having roots in social relations. But in nations in which the social contract is being renegotiated, such as Germany, or in parts of Asia, eastern Europe, Latin America, or Africa, there are natural opportunities for literacy development to be part of that political process.

The social climate in the U.S. today is overshadowed by fiscal crisis and political conservatism. Social change in a country that is not in the midst of revolution is an incremental, slow process punctuated by periods of upheaval, but supported by steady, dedicated organizing and learning. We must find ways to support the small but important changes that are happening, to blow on these embers so that, over time, they can spread, burning strongly. Some of the help, perspectives, knowledge and skills needed can be found through international networking. International communication and cooperation have never been more important.

Paul asked me to "open the debate," and I hope I have raised some issues worthy of continued conversation. Thank you very much.

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Acknowledgements

Jereann King, Andy Pates, Page McCullough, Si Kahn, Cathy Howell, Jacque Cook, Susan Lytle, Jean Hammink, Sondra Stein, Jonathan Estes, Jearlean Osborne, Betty Mosely, Cathy Chapman, Tobi Lippin, George Friday, Tomás Kalmar, Beth Broadway, Phil Rose, Linda Stout, Fannie Corbett, Juliet Merrifield, Connie White, Janice Munsey, and Jaqueline Cason are among the many people who have generously shared their work and their wisdom in ways that helped me frame these comments. I thank them deeply.